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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 001117

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR WITH FM ZEBARI DISCUSS RIYADH SUMMIT,  
NEIGHBORS CONFERENCE

REF: BAGHDAD 1033

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

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[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: On March 30, the Foreign Minister warmly welcomed Ambassador Crocker to Iraq, accepted copies of his credentials, and discussed at some length the recent Arab League Summit in Riyadh. The GoI countered Saudi comments about an "illegal occupation" by noting Iraqi concurrence with the coalition presence. He suggested that Saudi Arabia's real concern was Iran's increased regional influence, which the Kingdom should counter by supporting the GoI. Zebari was generally pleased with the summit's outcome and hoped Arab states would be more than spectators in the future. Iraq has raised the detention of 15 British sailors with Iran multiple times, but "more pressure" may be required.

[¶](#)2. (C) Zebari cited his frustration in overseeing foreign policy against the backdrop of many GoI voices claiming to speak on behalf of Iraq's international goals -- "everyone is busy doing my work." He called for greater discipline within the GoI, complained about the PM's "incompetent" staff, and asked the Ambassador to help MFA develop as an institution by coordinating key issues with the Minister. Preparation for the expanded neighbors' conference was complicated by poor GoI coordination; Zebari said there were "new ideas" on the conference. Both Turkey and Egypt were willing to host an expanded conference without a preliminary "neighbors only" event, he said, but some still wanted the event in Iraq and Kuwait remained a possible fall back. The GoI would insist on controlling the agenda regardless of venue. End summary.

Credentials passed to FM

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[¶](#)3. (C) Foreign Minister Zebari received copies of Ambassador Crocker's letter of credentials March 30, noting his pleasure at the Ambassador's return; he cited the Ambassador's familiarity with Iraq and the region and looked forward to working on "common goals" in these "critical and historic times." The Ambassador expressed his pleasure at being here to work with the great people of Iraq and assist GoI efforts to reign in violence.

Riyadh summit

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[¶](#)4. (C) Stating that Iraq would not "shy away" from its close relationship with the U.S., Zebari said Iraq had countered King Abdullah's remarks at the Riyadh Summit (regarding an "illegal foreign occupation" of Iraq) by stressing that the coalition presence was not illegal, was at Iraqi invitation and consent, and had an international mandate. He did not speculate as to the King's motivation, but joked that some cited the "illegal occupation" as Iran's influence in Iraq.

Saudi Arabia has "a deep sense of insecurity" about Iran's role in the region, a concern which it could not "tolerate nor ponder." Riyadh's attitude towards the (Shia-led) GoI is not positive, said Zebari, who had encouraged the Saudis to recognize that the best option to overcome Iranian influence was to support the independence of the GoI. Conversely, neglecting the GoI would play into Iranian hands. Zebari said he "hammered" this issue repeatedly with Arab counterparts.

¶ 15. (C) Riyadh was Zebari's fourth Arab Summit, and he detected a heightened awareness of the danger of what is happening in Iraq. He was generally pleased with public statements and positive atmospherics in bilateral meetings (mentioning Saudi, Jordan, Kuwait, Egypt, Arab League, Turkey, and Syria). Iraq's "tough words" at the ministerial helped set the stage for a practical discussion of Iraq, he suggested, and aside from King Abdullah's remarks (which left Iraq "a bit hurt"), statements were not provocative and no one was calling for withdrawal of U.S. troops. Withdrawal would be "the real disaster," he had emphasized with his Arab counterparts -- who were "on the defensive" about not doing enough to support Iraq. He called on Arab states to move beyond a "spectator" role. Statements in support of a high-level Arab League gathering in Iraq were also significant, he added.

¶ 16. (C) Asked about debt relief, Zebari said the topic was addressed positively and with "balance" in Riyadh, without elaborating. He had focused on GoI efforts to stabilize the country and called for Arab support of reconciliation. In closed session in Riyadh, Zebari claimed he had told participants that the GoI's legitimacy comes from the Iraqi people and did not require Arab approval -- reconciliation

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should therefore focus around support for GoI efforts.

¶ 17. (C) Outcomes of the summit included a "clear, unequivocal" condemnation of terrorism, support for the Baghdad security plan, urging the Arab League to revive reconciliation conferences, positive comments on debt relief, praise for the Baghdad Neighbors' Conference, mention of the Iraq Compact, and "the usual" notes about diplomatic representation and reciprocal visits. The PM was satisfied that the Riyadh statement was the best Iraq could hope for "under the circumstances."

British sailors detained in Iran

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¶ 18. (C) Iraq raised the detention of 15 British sailors and marines with Iran's foreign minister, said Zebari, which was the "second or third" GoI approach to encourage their release. The sailors were part of MNF "operating in our waters at our invitation." He acknowledged the absence of a clear agreement on a demarcation line between Iraqi and Iranian waters, adding that these patrols had been ongoing for some time in the area. He lamented Iran's "backing down" on a promise to release the female sailor, noting that more pressure may be needed. Summit participants in Riyadh were not willing to commit to increasing the pressure (although Saudi FM Saud al-Faisal had reportedly agreed to call for the sailors' release if asked by the press).

¶ 19. (C) Zebari had not personally discussed the sailors' detention with Iran's Ambassador in Baghdad (suggesting that he thought his staff may have done so), but said the Iranian foreign minister's aides with whom he had raised it report "in similar channels" as Iran's Ambassador. He said he had raised the issue in New York as well.

GoI coordination of foreign policy

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¶ 10. (C) Expressing "high hopes" that better security would

pave the way for more effective Iraqi diplomacy, Zebari emphasized that there is "very little we can achieve on foreign policy" without fixing "the domestic" aspect of governance. Domestic stability and coordination was needed to gain international credibility. Zebari said Iraq's foreign policy was unduly complex because "everyone is busy doing my work" -- a clear jab at other GoI entities engaging in uncoordinated meetings with foreign officials. Kuwait had hosted, for example, four delegations of an "almost presidential" level within two weeks, confusing MFA efforts at coordination. (Note: The PM's office has similarly accused Zebari of uncoordinated engagement with foreign leaders. End note.) The FM called for discipline within the GoI, reigning in individuals who were giving a "completely different picture" of GoI goals in their international outreach.

Slow coordination of expanded neighbors' conference

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¶11. (C) Asking to reserve discussion of the ministerial-level neighbors' conference for another time (likely to avoid sensitive topics in front of MFA and Embassy staff), Zebari said all parties supported the concept, wanted to keep momentum alive, and were juggling a number of "new ideas" about how to proceed. Pressed on the importance of setting dates and venue quickly, Zebari said Turkey was still willing to host an expanded meeting and that Egypt was keen to host on similar terms. FM Aboul Gheit has specifically asked President Mubarak about Egyptian willingness to host a neighbors plus event and received a positive nod for hosting on April 23-24.

¶12. (C) Zebari said he had spoken with Treasury DepSec Kimmit in New York and the UNSG in Riyadh and agreed that mixing the neighbors' conference (which had a strong security and political focus) with an Iraq Compact event (focused on economic engagement and reconstruction), might not meet the approval of the GCC. The two events have separate lists of participants as well. Nonetheless, Zebari said that an expanded neighbors plus event could feature a session in which the Compact was signed -- avoiding excessive pressure to host two events that might be incompatible. The Ambassador reminded Zebari that two distinct events on subsequent days were feasible and offered an opportunity to advance Iraq's interests on multiple fronts.

¶13. (C) Asking the Ambassador and DCM to join him in private session, Zebari noted difficulty in coordination with the PM's office (see para 15). In spite of prior understandings of the PM's views on parameters for an expanded ministerial-level neighbors' conference, the PM's office had

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apparently not taken action and was under pressure because "Najaf does not want an expanded conference." Zebari had pushed back, but was finding coordination very difficult.

¶14. (C) The GoI wanted to control the agenda regardless of venue, said Zebari, who hoped to give the world confidence in GoI management of a large diplomatic event. The PM's office had made unhelpful suggestions about meeting in Geneva (a "neutral" location) and the PM himself still wanted to host the event in Iraq (Zebari said President Talabani still had similar notions), in spite of Zebari's insistence that the scope of the meeting would overwhelm either Baghdad or Erbil. He felt he had convinced them of the impracticalities, yet the PM and his advisors were still pressing for an Iraqi venue. Iran wants it here as well, he noted. At present, all options remain open, including Kuwait as a possible fall back (Kuwaiti FM reportedly gained the Emir's concurrence). Kuwait would be a host country "without an agenda" of its own.

Strengthening the MFA's foreign policy role

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¶15. (C) The FM told the Ambassador privately that the MFA, an institution built with U.S. help, should play a more central role in Iraq's foreign policy. The world needed to respect MFA's voice. Multiple channels of communication on foreign policy issues complicated MFA's role and diminished its international impact -- including by implication U.S. negotiation with other Iraqi officials on issues clearly within the purview of MFA. Claiming to have good working relations with the PM himself, Zebari cited difficulties in working with the PM's staff, many of whom are "incompetent" and "sectarian to the core." The PM would often take Zebari's advice on an issue, only to have the agreement unraveled by his advisors. The Ambassador expressed his great respect for the MFA as an institution and said he planned frequent coordination with the minister.

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